



KAZAKHSTAN | ASTANA TO ALMATY (SEPT)

TOUR

Sept 23rd - Oct 3rd 2024
10 Nights

OVERVIEW

On this incredible 10-night adventure we will start in the new capital of Kazakhstan, **Astana** and finish in the old, **Almaty**.

In between these two fascinating cities, we will travel by road, rail, and air as we adventure and explore parts of Kazakhstan only a few have seen before. We will be heading to the industrial base of **Karaganda**, the infamous **Semipalatinsk** (in two words; Gulags and Nukes), and **Kurchatov** - the Los Alamos of the USSR, where the Red Bomb was developed and tested. Plus, we will even visit '**The Polygon**'; the vast nuclear testing range full of abandoned measuring platforms, bunkers, craters, buried machinery, and the scenic yet chilling 'Atomic Lake'.

We'll get a history lesson on the darker side of this little-known land, as well as updates on what's been going on in the cities and countryside as we pass between them seeing local life, industry, and so much more. Combining our expertise working in the country, contacts, and in-depth research, we've put together a tour that is like no other to offer you the best in Kazakhstan tourism.

Please Note: the situation vis-a-vis access to the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Polygon is very much changeable with no notice. So while we do intend to run the tour as scheduled here there is a chance that things may change and we have to adjust to which areas we visit, where we stay overnight, and so on. We have explored this area thoroughly though and have redundancies and backup plans in place, so we can still assure all visitors that they will experience as much access to the site as possible when they visit with Koryo Tours.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Astana - once the centre of the Virgin Lands campaign, now a national capital
- Semipalatinsk - fascinating small city and once home to an exiled Dostoyevsky
- Nuclear Polygon - USSR's testing range for atmospheric and underground nukes
- Chagan - Abandoned long-range bomber base and garrison town
- Kurchatov - Home of the bomb-boffins and Beria. Semi-abandoned these days
- Karaganda - in the heart of Kazakhstan, also the heart of the old Central Asian Gulag system
- Almaty - Serene and charming - the old capital nestled against the Tian Shan Mountains

Please note that the itinerary may differ slightly to what is below but your tour leader will do their best to ensure that as much is covered as possible and will also add in extras when there is time such as a visit to a local bar or a funfair. We will make the most of your time on the tour to guarantee the experience of a lifetime.

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Sept 23rd – MONDAY (ARRIVAL DAY – ASTANA)

- **Flights to Astana** (airport code NQZ) arrive from many international destinations – let us know which flight you will be on, and we will arrange your pick-up and transfer to the hotel. Arriving even earlier is, of course, fine and can be accommodated – this would give you time to settle in, fight jet-lag, etc
- Today we start the tour with a **group dinner** in a restaurant with a stunning view over the city, coordination and briefing session, before the adventure ahead!

Overnight: Astana- Kazakhstan's shiny new Capital City!

Meals included: Dinner

Sept 24th – TUESDAY (ASTANA)

- Astana is a new city rightly famed for its unique approach to architecture; in that it piles together a wide range of different styles and forms with the end result being either a glimpse at the future of post-modern cities, or a horrifying un-curated mish-mash of clashing buildings.
- **Bayterek Tower** – now the icon of the city, this ornate monument has a viewing platform 97 metres above the ground (1997 is when Astana become the capital city) and is designed to evoke a folk tale about a bird laying an egg in a tree. Amazing views over the city from here
- **Palace of Peace and Reconciliation** – glass Pyramid from the eminent architect Norman Foster with the vague but noble aim of reconciling the world's faiths and ideologies and bringing an end to violence. Even if this goal remains elusive it is a stunning building and worth exploring!
- **Hazret Sultan Mosque** – the biggest in Kazakhstan (and second in the region only to the monstrous Gypjak Mosque in Turkmenistan). Classically Islamic in style and Kazakh in décor, this impressive building can house up to 5000 worshippers at once
- **Khan Shatyr Entertainment Centre** – perhaps the building that architecturally sums up modern Astana more than any other. Another Carbuncle/work-of-genius (delete as you prefer) from Norman Foster, this ingenious structure looking somewhat like a lop-sided tent maintains an even temperature year round and provides leisure facilities, shopping, entertainment in general
- **River Ishim** – we'll stroll the banks of this waterway in the centre of town, to see a slice of local life and people enjoying their time. Remember that

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almost all of Astana's population are recent arrivals so a big mix of people from around the country and beyond can be met with here

Overnight: Astana

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch

Sept 25th – WEDNESDAY (AKMOL & KARAGANDA)

- We take a drive out of the city to the nearby village of **Akmol**; home of the chilling **Museum of the Camp for Wives of Traitors to the Motherland** – A sensitively-done spot telling the story of the loyal (going to such a place could often be avoided with a divorce and public denunciation) women sent here when their husbands were persecuted.
- We see a little more of this settlement on a walk around; church, mosque, and apartment buildings now occupy this former gulag-site before leaving for a 3 hour drive to the major city of Karaganda (lunch along the way)
- An introductory **walking tour of the city centre** - focusing on the architecture, history, and local culture of this city (all of which is varied and fascinating), we'll visit the central park as well and see and mix with locals spending leisure time here.
- We will also visit a local painter – famed for having no arms and painting with the brush in his mouth. He sells his amazing work and will speak about his life growing up close to the nearby nuclear weapons testing area – which may have caused his birth defects
- Karaganda is a large city but with a very walkable centre – the Russian/Soviet influence here is strong and our guide (a local to this place) will tell us all about the city, you'll find it fascinating for sure! He can also recommend good spots for dinner/evening socialising/etc

Overnight: Chaika Hotel – amazing brutalist Soviet monstrosity. Real time-warp stuff. One part of the hotel was built specifically for the visit of Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space. The rooms are comfy and modern. The building itself is timeless!

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch

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Sept 26th – THURSDAY (KARAGANDA)

- We drive an hour out to the museum of [KarLag](#), the local gulag system – a dark part of history indeed told through the rooms of this former **NKVD HQ**. State ‘enemies’, departed nationalities (a vast number of whom were dumped in central Asia due to Stalin’s paranoia about enemies within – the largest numbers being Germans from the west and Koreans from the east. Their stories are told here in this chilling memorial to the all-too-recent evils.
- The village around this museum is made up largely of former Gulag barracks, admin buildings, and medical centres, we will take a look around and also visit the depressing cemetery for children who died in this cruel system.
- The nearby town of [ShahTinsk](#) hosts us for lunch and some views of local industries; coal mining primarily, but also steel production and agriculture.
- In the afternoon we offer the choice between free time to further explore Karaganda city or a trip to a former execution ground (what a choice, we know!) marked by tasteful and meaningful memorials to the various nationalities whose people were among the unfortunate souls to perish here.

Overnight: Chaika Hotel

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch

Sept 27th – FRIDAY (ASTANA/TRAIN RIDE)

- We return to Astana by road in the morning. A special lunch with a local family awaits us when we arrive back in the Kazakh capital and then time to shop for some supplies for the overnight train ride ahead of us.
- All aboard! We jump onto a **sleeper train** making its way through the night and across the country to the city of Kurchatov - home of the soviet atomic weapons program. Comfy beds and a clean restaurant await us and rolling steppe outside the windows for this 800km journey. We will have dinner delivered to us on the platform at Ekibastusz Station that evening.

Overnight: Onboard the train – 4 beds in each room. Comfortable and clean

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

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Sept 28th – SATURDAY (SEMEY/NUCLEAR POLYGON/KURCHATOV)

- We arrive in the morning in the eastern city of Semey and grab breakfast and the chance to leave our luggage in a local hotel (we will be back in a couple of days) - we then board our vehicles for an epic adventure in a fascinating and formerly forbidden area
- We go deep into the Polygon - heading for a wide range of sites associated with the Soviet nuclear weapons program - the **Atomic Lake**, abandoned and derelict **ICBM sites, underground bunkers**, buildings erected and then destroyed in nuclear test explosions, and much more. It will be an epic adventure and, of course, protective clothing is provided when required.
- We'll make a few stops on the way through but most significantly **Atomic Lake** - caused by a deep underground nuclear blast - this was in fact made deliberately and is known as the world's first and only use of industrial nuclear weapons. Find out what on earth they were thinking and meet some fishermen looking for three-eyed fish in the 180m deep lake.
- We'll have a **Roadside Picnic** and you will find some eerie similarities to this part of the trip) and continue to see some relics of the testing program. A local expert will also be with us to explain in detail, answer questions, etc.
- We arrive in **Kurchatov** and check in at our hotel, used mainly by scientists still studying the effects of all the nuclear tests in this region. Kurchatov was founded in 1947 simply to make Soviet Nuclear weapons a reality. Under the control of then KGB Chief Lavrentiy Beria and scientist Igor Kurchatov, this is where the arms race became a two-horse event.

Overnight: Mayak Hotel - another time-warp hotel with period furnishings and decor.

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Sept 29th – SUNDAY (KURCHATOV/CHAGAN)

- **Museum of the Semipalatinsk Test Site** - a detailed and deep explanation of what this place is, what happened here, and what effect their inventions can have. Some machines from that time are displayed here too. (note: this museum opens and closes at the whim of higher powers, so its opening cannot be 100% confirmed - if not open we will have a lecture on the history of the area at a different location)
- We board our vehicle and take a drive, deep into a formerly off-limits (very off limits!) area; the Semipalatinsk Polygon - nuclear testing ground chosen due to its remoteness, lack of population, and because it seemed

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like a good spot to blow a few things up. we provide protective gear of course

- Next stop is Chagan- once a deeply secret **long-range bomber base**. Now a deeply abandoned former long-range bomber base. See the massive runways, the remaining ammunition hangars, and the collapsing main buildings of the base. Plus the garrison town nearby which housed the base staff from 1954 to 1994 and now stands completely stripped like a spooky post-apocalyptic warning. A bit of UrbEx here
- We will visit a local family who used to live in Chagan - hear their stories of what it was like living at the front line of the Cold War so far in the USSR interior, and what things have been like for them since the base closed and their lives changed forever.

Overnight | Mayak Hotel

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch

Sept 30th – MONDAY (SEMEY)

- We leave Kurchaov and the Polygon/Test Field behind us today as we return to Semey. Semipalatinsk is actually the former name of this city; correctly it is now referred to as **Semey**, we explore with a city tour of this little-visited settlement.
- We will spend some time with a very special group of people - a local school who specialise in teaching disadvantaged children from more modest backgrounds. They teach English to a very high level here and we will meet with some teachers and children from the school who will give us some information about their hometown, give us a performance, and give us a chance to learn from these kids as well as helping them with a chance for conversation time with visitors - this is another Koryo Tours exclusive and something you will never forget
- After lunch we liberate you for **free time** - a couple of recommendations include; **Fine Arts Museum** - not just the best collection in Kazakhstan but also a display of abnormal anatomy, something quirky and troubling (especially with our trip to the nuclear test site coming up)
Stronger Than Death Monument - in the Tatar section of town (itself an attraction we will explore some more) - shows the resilience of those who live and have lived in this remote part of the world.
- Free time from the later afternoon to explore the city, have an evening out away from the shadow of nuclear tests and enjoy a very unique place indeed on a very special day.

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Overnight: Semey Hotel – very Soviet-style place with an aesthetic unlike what you may be used to! All the charm of the late-USSR but with free wifi! You'll love it!

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch

Oct 1st – TUESDAY (SEMEY/ALMATY)

- Once upon a time Semipalatinsk was a wealthy trading city, situated between China and Russia, and acted as a gateway to the Central Asian territories added to the Russian Empire in the 19th Century. We will explore mainly on foot and see buildings from various eras, statues and monuments, mosaics and a little-known part of history. All explained to us as we make our way on a short walking tour around this unexpectedly-charming place. Sites we visit include...
- **Lenin Alley** – a common sight in Kazakhstan's smaller cities; a collection of Lenin's in a nice park setting. The central piece is awe-inspiring.
- **Victory Park** – with statues, tank monument, and a hang-out place for locals.
- Dostoyevsky Museum– the titan of Russian Literature, was exiled out here in Semipalatinsk and this museum explains the importance of his works. *Pro-tip: read Crime and Punishment before your visit.*
- After an early lunch we head to Semey Airport for a flight to Almaty – the former capital and the most charming city in the country
- We transfer to our hotel and you can head out for exploring, enjoying the very lively coffee shop scene, hot up some amazing restaurants and bars, pamper yourself at a beauty centre. Do whatever you like in this very modern but also laid-back place. You've earned it after the long journeys of the last few days!

Overnight: Hotel Kazakhstan – a towering monstrosity offering great views over the city as well as faded-luxury. An iconic structure in an iconic city; ideal for finishing off our Kazakhstan adventure

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch

Oct 2nd – WEDNESDAY (ALMATY)

- We embark on a walking tour of this amazing city – Almaty. Nestled against the precipitous Tian Shan Mountain range and dotted with parks, theatres, boulevards, and much more. Sites we visit include...

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- **Almaty Metro** – one of only two subway systems in the whole of Central Asia (the other is the Moscow knock-off in Tashkent) this system opened in 2012 and strikes a balance between Moscow opulence and modern efficiency
- **Green Bazaar & Rakhat Chocolate Factory** – these neighbouring sites are local institutions. You can smell the sweetness from the latter all across this part of the city. Banter and barter with sellers in the market, pick up the apples that Almaty is known for as well as all manner of other delicious local delicacies. Get your sweet tooth into action with the terrific and very affordable selection at the chocolate factory (ideal for gifts too!)
- **Panfilovets Park** – Almaty's main place of leisure. Very pleasant and marked with stunning and evocative monuments to the Kazakh soldiers who fell while fighting to defend Moscow from the Nazi invasion. **Zenkov Cathedral** is also located in this park.
- **Central Mosque** – With its broad ethnic mixture and clear secularism, it is easy to forget that Kazakhstan is a majority-Muslim country. We'll have a look at the main mosque in Almaty to see how the locals worship and what their faith means to them.
- **Arbat Street** – every good former USSR town has one; a pedestrian area ideal for promenading, window shopping, café culture, public art sales, and so on. This one is very modern, and is lined with some great examples of brutalist apartment buildings.
- **Kok-Tebe** – a cable car ride up to a mountain overlooking the city. Amazing views, a statue of the Beatles, A Ferris Wheel and toboggan ride, small zoo, bars, and entertainment in general. Simply put, this is the city's best spot and a very popular area for local families, youths, and everyone really. We'll have a final lunch of the tour along the way. A fitting relaxing end to an intense, mind-blowing week!

Overnight: Hotel Kazakhstan

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch

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Oct 3rd – THURSDAY (DEPARTURE DAY)

Flights leave from Almaty airport to various destinations both international and domestic. Let us know where you are going, and we will get you there on time!

You may also wish to spend more time in Almaty, a charming city – walkable, friendly people, lots to see and do. We recommend continuing at least one more day to make the most of the trip – you won't regret it!

Don't forget that Almaty is also very close to the border with Kyrgyzstan – the capital city of Bishkek is just a few hours away, and there are buses and shared taxis plying this route very frequently. We can help with this if you like and can recommend a visit to Bishkek too

TOP RECOMMENDATION – however, this is the best choice – Join our tour to TURKMENISTAN! If you take this option not only do you join the ranks of Koryo Tours' extra-special veterans but also get an extra night in Ashgabat. We fly from Almaty to Turkmenistan this afternoon. When there we meet our local partners and have time to relax, explore, do whatever you like really until the Turkmenistan Tour begins Continue your Central Asia adventure with us – it's the best way to see the region's most amazing parts!

End of Tour

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TOUR PACKAGE

INCLUDED

- Accommodation
- All internal transportation (flight, train, road)
- Local guide/translator
- All included sightseeing
- Entry fees, nuclear zone permits
- Airport Transfers
- Koryo Tours Tour Leader plus local guides/translators
- An Amazing Experience!

NOT INCLUDED

- Tips for the local guides and driver (approx 10-15 USD per day)
- Incidentals (drinks, souvenirs, etc.)
- Optional single room supplement of 50 USD per night (not available on the train)
- Visa Fee - if applicable. Most western nationalities do not require a visa for Kazakhstan
- Onward travel from Almaty - we can advise and assist with options though

ADDITIONAL NOTES

- Please note that when on tour your day-to-day itinerary may differ to what is advertised above. However, your tour leader will ensure that everything available at the time is covered, and replacement options are provided where needed. We will also add extras when there is time (such as a visit to a local bar or amusement park).
- After the tour, we will send out a list of all participants' emails so you can keep in touch, swap photos etc. If you do not wish to be on this list, then please let us know.

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